CONVEYOR SYSTEM FOR LOAD-CARRYING CARTS

This application claims priority of provisional application Ser. No. 60/085,248, filed May 13, 1998.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to conveyor systems for movement of load-carrying carts. The invention is particularly useful for the conveyance of load-carrying carts between vertically separated floors, but can also be usefully applied to the conveyance of such carts horizontally. The system is useful in a wide variety of applications, such as transit terminals, supermarkets, warehouses, etc., as well as for a variety of industrial applications. The present invention employs technology of the Weller U.S. Pat. No. 3,655,013, and of European Patent No. 0,012,149, but constitutes an improvement over such technology.

Currently, the principal means for moving load-carrying carts from one elevation to another have been elevators, inclined moving walks, conventional escalators, and also special cart conveyors of the type described in the before-mentioned Weller U.S. patent. All such prior systems have had certain disadvantages, which are obviated by the present invention.

Until the present invention, elevators have offered the safest method of moving loaded carts from floor to floor. But taking into consideration the elevator floor space occupied by a cart and its attendant, the elevator capacity required to handle a large volume of traffic is such that this technique is both unrealistic and unacceptable for most purposes.

Inclined moving walks are used in some cases for moving carts and their attendants from place to place. However, such moving walks are not very suitable for moving carts from one vertical level to another. For one thing, safety codes require the inclination of the moving walk to be very low, so that extensive space is required for a given amount of change in elevation. In addition, there can be significant safety considerations because of possible run-away carts, etc.

It has also been proposed to provide specially designed carts that can be moved onto conventional passenger-carrying escalators, which typically can convey passengers at an angle of 30–35°. This, however, is regarded as a particularly dangerous technique for conveying of loaded carts because of the possibility of load shifting on the carts, tilting or jamming of the carts or the like.

The cart conveyor system of the before-mentioned Weller U.S. Pat. No. 3,655,013 is designed to allow a cart to be carried up or down a substantial incline, while the cart is retained in a more or less horizontal orientation. These conveyors are intended to be operated in parallel with passenger escalators or alongside stairways, for example, allowing the loaded carts to be placed on the special cart conveyor at one level and then retrieved at the next level, the passenger or cart attendant having either walked or been conveyed to the second level. The Weller U.S. Pat. No. 3,655,013 represented a significant advance in cart conveyor systems, particularly in recognizing the desirability of employing laterally opposed conveyor bands for engagement of the cart on opposite lateral sides. Nevertheless, the overall design of the Weller conveyor system has certain limitations which render its performance less than optimum for many applications.

In accordance with the present invention, a novel and improved cart conveyor system is provided in which both

the cart and the conveyor are specially designed and adapted for each other to provide for highly efficient, safe conveyance of the carts, either upward or downward between different floor levels, or even along the same floor level where appropriate. To particular advantage, the carts and the conveyor mechanisms of the new system are mutually designed such that load-carrying platforms of the carts can be located very low on the cart, and preferably at a level which is little if any above the level of the wheels of the cart. This has one important advantage of maintaining the center of gravity of the loaded cart as low as practicable. Additionally, many carts of the existing conventional design, such as luggage carts frequently found at airports and other passenger terminals, are constructed with load-carrying frames providing not only a low center of gravity but also permitting lateral projection or overhang of the load items. The system of the present invention readily accommodates the design of its carts to be compatible with the load-carrying configuration of carts of the type which are currently used and accepted for conventional use on a level surface. In addition, carts constructed in accordance with the invention may in a practical manner be provided with physical structure, in the form of baskets, platforms or other load-carrying framework that itself projects laterally beyond the wheels of the cart and over the tops of the laterally opposed conveyor bands without compromising the safety of the system. This is made possible in part because the mutual design of the carts and conveyor mechanisms allows the load-carrying elements of the cart to be kept as low as possible to the ground, and also provides for laterally projecting portions of the load, and/or the load-carrying elements, to be guided and supported over the top of the conveyor bands during the conveying operation.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the design of the carts and conveyors is such that the load-carrying platforms, at least portions of which are at a minimum elevation, at or near the level of the wheels of the cart, nevertheless provide for and accommodate lateral protrusion of the load from the load-carrying platform. To this end, the system of the invention, which includes laterally opposed conveyor bands, engageable with the carts on opposite sides, provides for the conveyor bands to be positioned at the lowest practicable level, typically and preferably within the height of the wheels. In addition, housings for the conveyor bands are also located as low as practicable in order to accommodate the projection of load items, such as duffel bags and the like, laterally outward from the carts and over the tops of the conveyor band housings.

Load-carrying carts pursuant to the present invention are especially designed and constructed for cooperation with a conveyor mechanism as generally described in the preceding paragraph. Such carts typically have a pair of widely spaced, non-swivelling wheels at one end, typically the back end, and ones or more swivel-mounted wheels at the opposite end. Where a single swivel wheel is employed, it typically is mounted along the center line of the cart. If a pair of swivel-mounted wheels is employed, they typically are spaced symmetrically with respect to the center line of the cart, spaced apart a distance less than the spacing of the fixed wheels. The conveyor system is provided with separate wheel tracks for the front and back wheels of the cart. In addition, as shown in the before-mentioned patents, where the conveyor is inclined, the guide tracks for the respective front and back wheels are offset horizontally such that, when the cart is ascending or descending the conveyor path, the cart is maintained or more less in a horizontal orientation,

preferably tilted slightly upward at the front. In addition, in accordance with the present invention, means are provided at the front of the cart for engagement with a retaining track extending along the conveyor path, which locks the front of the cart against vertical movement with respect to the conveyor path such that the cart, which is being engaged at the back by opposed conveyor bands, is prevented from tipping. Where a single front wheel is employed, the retaining means may be integrated with the wheel mounting structure. Where a pair of front wheels is provided, it may be more expedient to employ a separate retaining element, positioned to engage a central retaining track, running the length of the conveyor path.

The principles of the invention are applicable to a wide variety of cart constructions and configurations, including carts with free running wheels, carts with automatic or manual brake systems.

For a more complete understanding of the above and other features and advantages of the invention, reference should be made to the following detailed description of preferred embodiments thereof and to the accompanying drawings.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a perspective view illustrating a typical installation of up-going and down-going cart conveyor systems according to the invention, shown in association with a conventional passenger escalator.

FIG. **2** is a side elevational view of the down-going cart conveyor system of FIG. **1**, with parts removed to show details of construction.

FIG. **3** is a front elevational view of the entry end of the cart conveyor of FIG. **2**.

FIG. **4** is a side elevational view, similar to FIG. **2**, illustrating an up-going cart conveyor system according to the invention.

FIGS. **5** and **6** are top plan views of the cart conveyor system of FIGS. **2** and **4** respectively.

FIG. **7** is a side elevational view of one preferred form of load-carrying cart forming part of the conveyor system of the invention.

FIG. **8** is a front elevational view of the cart of FIG. **7**.

FIG. **9** is a top plan view of the cart of FIG. **7**.

FIG. **10** is a side elevational view illustrating a plurality of the carts of FIG. **7** telescoped for storage.

FIG. **11** is a side elevational view of a second preferred form of cart, similar to the cart of FIG. **7**, but provided with brake means for locking wheels of the cart.

FIGS. **12**, **13** are front perspective views of the cart of FIG. **7**, illustrated empty and loaded with luggage items.

FIG. **14** is a front perspective view of the cart of FIG. **11**.

FIGS. **15**, **16** and **17** are side elevation, front elevation and top plan views respectively of a third preferred form of load-carrying cart, similar to the cart of FIG. **7** but provided with a single front wheel.

FIG. **18** is an enlarged, fragmentary view illustrating the front wheel mounting structure of the cart of FIG. **15**.

FIG. **19** is a front perspective view of the cart of FIG. **15**.

FIG. **20** is a side elevational view of a cart, similar to that of FIG. **15**, but provided with brake means for locking wheels thereof.

FIG. **21** is a cross sectional illustration of a modified form of cart conveyor system for handling carts having wheels which lock, either automatically or under the control of the user, the conveyor having a track made up of a series of closely spaced, freely rotating rollers supporting the locked wheels of the cart.

FIG. **22** is an enlarged, fragmentary illustration of the portion of FIG. **21**, illustrating details of the roller track arrangement, as well as details of the cart moving and guiding arrangements.

FIG. **23** is an enlarged, fragmentary view, partly in section, illustrating features of the roller track shown in FIGS. **21** and **22**.

DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

Referring now to the drawings, and initially to FIG. **1** thereof, the reference numerals **10**, **10***a* designates generally a conveyor system according to the invention for transporting luggage carts **11** between an upper level floor **12** and a lower level floor **13**. In the illustrated installation, the cart conveyors **10**, **10***a* are installed parallel and adjacent to conventional passenger escalators **14**, **14***a*. This arrangement enables a user **15** to enter a cart **11** (either loaded or unloaded) into the entry end of the cart conveyor at one level, where it is picked up by conveyor bands and carried to the other level, as will be described. The user, after entering the cart into the conveyor system steps over to the passenger escalator **14**, **14***a* and is carried thereby to the other level. Preferably, the relative speeds of the passenger escalators **14**, **14***a* and the cart conveyors **10**, **10***a* are such that the cart user will arrive at the second level at the same time or slightly in advance of the cart so as to be available to remove the cart as it arrives at its destination.

With reference to FIGS. **2**, **3** and **5**, and **7–10** of the drawings, the illustrated form of load-carrying cart **11** is provided with a pair of spaced-apart rear wheels **16**, preferably mounted to be fixedly aligned, and a second pair of spaced-apart front wheels **17** mounted on swivels. The rear wheels **16** are set at the wider spacing and the front wheels **17**, although spaced apart, are located closer to the center line of the cart, as is evident in FIGS. **8** and **9**. The wheels are mounted on a frame structure which includes spaced-apart vertical frame elements **18**, at the back of the cart, and a generally horizontal, somewhat U-shaped frame element **19**. In the cart illustrated in FIGS. **7–10**, the rear wheels are mounted within wheel shrouds **20**, which are fixed to the lower ends **21** of the vertical frame elements **18**. A plate **21**, extending transversely across a front portion of the frame **19** provides a mounting for swivel brackets **21** by which the front wheel **17** are journaled for rotation and are arranged to swivel about a vertical axis in a generally well known manner.

The down-going conveyor installation shown in FIG. **2** is provided with two sets of wheel tracks, a first set of widely spaced tracks **22** for the fixed wheels **16**, and a second set of tracks **23** for the swivel wheels. In the illustrated arrangement, the fixed wheels are located at the back and the swivel wheels in the front, and this is normally to be preferred, although this could be reversed under appropriate circumstances. In the down-going conveyor system of FIG. **2**. the tracks **23** for the front wheels are offset horizontally in the forward direction relative to the tracks **22** for the rear wheels. As a result, while the cart is moving along the inclined conveyor path, the cart is retained in a more or less horizontal disposition, as is evident in FIG. **2**. A slight downward tilting of the front end of the cart, while on the down-going conveyor, may be desirable from the standpoint of the overall geometry of the conveyor mechanism.

At the entry end **24** of the down-going conveyor mechanism, both of the tracks **22, 23** are at the same level, and desirably may tilt downward slightly so that gravity assists the movement of the cart into engagement with moving conveyor bands **25, 26** (FIG. **5**). The respective tracks **22, 23** then go through a transition area, shown in FIG. **2**, in which the tracks change course from the slight downward incline to a relatively steeper downward incline. Typically, the principal inclined path of the conveyor mechanism is disposed at about 30° to the horizontal.

In the conveyor system of the before-mentioned Weller U.S. Pat. No. 3,655,013, a conveyor mechanism is provided which includes opposed conveyor bands for engaging the cart on opposite lateral sides and advancing the cart along the desired path. This broad principle is employed in the system of the present invention, with important improvements being provided in the design of both the conveyor mechanism itself and in the associated load-carrying carts. to provide for highly efficient, safe. two-way transport of the carts from one floor level to another. The conveyor bands **25, 26** utilized in the system of the invention are designed for two-way flexibility. That is, the bands are comprised of chain links which are hinged in one way for passing around drive and idler sprockets **28, 29** in the usual manner, with additional flexibility for redirection of the chain path in a vertical plane. As reflected in FIG. **2**, the conveyor bands **25, 26** after passing around idler sprockets **29** at the upper end, travel in a slightly downwardly inclined path corresponding to the entrance path for the conveyor. Thereafter, the conveyor bands turn downward as at **30**, to follow the principal downward incline of the conveyor, generally following the contour of the tracks **22** for the back wheels of the cart. Suitable guide tracks **27** (FIG. **22**) are provided for the conveyor bands to cause them to follow the paths indicated. When the conveyor bands reach the bottom of the primary incline, they are redirected as at **31** to follow the slightly downwardly inclined exit path **32** of the cart, with the conveyor band in the exit portion **33** and at the turn **31** being guided to follow generally the contours of the guide track **22** for the back wheels **16**. In the illustrated arrangement, the lower sprocket **28** is driven by a motor **34**, although either end of the conveyor belts may be driven, as will be understood.

In accordance with principles known from the before-mentioned patents, the conveyor bands are formed with a series of closely spaced resilient projections or cones **35**, preferably formed of rubber or plastic, which project laterally, in directly opposed relation, into a principal guide channel **36** (FIG. **5**) provided by the structure of the conveyor installation, for the overall confinement and guidance of the carts, as they traverse the length of the conveyor mechanism. The conveyor bands are contained within housings **37, 38** which include side walls **39, 40** and top walls **41, 42**. The side walls **39, 40**, which may be formed of or covered with plastic material, are spaced apart a distance such as to closely confine the widely spaced back wheels **16** of the cart and enable them to be engaged and advanced by the projecting elements **35** of the conveyor bands, as will be further described.

When entering the conveyor mechanism, the front wheels of the cart are initially engaged by tapered guide blocks **43** (FIG. **5**), which divert the front end of the cart as needed to align it properly with the principal longitudinal axis of the conveyor system.

One of the important improvements incorporated into the new system is an improved arrangement for engaging the carts by the projecting conveyor elements **35** at a very low level on the carts, preferably directly adjacent the back wheels and within the vertical confines thereof. To this end, the carts are advantageously provided with specially configured abutment brackets **44**, fixed to the wheel shrouds **20**. The brackets **44** extend laterally outward a short distance from the outer walls of the wheel shrouds **20** and preferably are of a V-shaped or arcuate configuration to provide upper and lower portions **45, 46** disposed at an angle of about 120°, typically each portion being disposed at an angle of about 30° forward of vertical for use in conjunction with a conveyor of approximately 30° incline.

The positioning of the conveyor bands **25, 26** is such that, when a cart **11** is descending a down-going conveyor, as shown in FIG. **2**, the projecting elements **35** engage the upper portions **45** of the abutment brackets **44**, so that the engaged surfaces **45** are disposed approximately at right angles to the axis of movement of the conveyor bands. Likewise, as shown in FIG. **4**, when a cart **11** is ascending an up-going conveyor, the positioning of the conveyor bands **25', 26'** is such that the projecting elements **35** thereof engage the abutment brackets **44** on the lower portions **46** thereof, so that the lower abutment bracket portions **46** are again disposed approximately at right angles to the axis of movement of the conveyor bands. Accordingly, when there is a maximum load relationship between the carts and the conveyor bands, as the carts are either ascending or descending the principal incline of the conveyor, there is an optimum mechanical relationship between the abutment brackets **44** and the conveyor projections **35**. When the carts are on the landing areas, at the entrance or exit to the conveyors, the abutment brackets necessarily will be disposed at somewhat of an angle to the axis of movement of the conveyor bands in the landing areas. However, in these areas the motion of the carts is approximately horizontal and preferably slightly downwardly inclined, such that there is minimum force exerted between the conveyor bands and the carts and a less than optimum angle of contact with the abutment brackets is tolerable.

As will be appreciated, when a cart is descending the down-going conveyor, it is being urged by gravity down the incline. Accordingly, the function of the conveyor bands **25, 26** on the down-going side of the conveyor may be principally to control the speed of descent by engagement of the projecting elements **35** with front faces of the upper portions **45** of the abutment brackets. However, should the cart require any urging in the forward direction, the back faces of the abutment bracket portions **45** will be engaged by the following pair of projecting elements on the conveyor bands.

To particular advantage, and as shown particularly in FIG. **22**, the lateral projection of the abutment brackets **44** from the wheel shrouds **20** is such that, when the cart **11** is engaged by the respective conveyor bands, the outer edges **44*a*** of the abutment brackets oppose the side walls **40** of the conveyor housing with only a slight clearance. This assures that the back wheels of the cart are accurately guided and confined as the cart proceeds along the conveyor path.

Pursuant to a significant aspect of the invention, means are provided for positively preventing the front of the cart from lifting as it is being propelled along the conveyor path. For this purpose, a retaining track **50** is provided running lengthwise along the conveyor path from one landing arena to the other. The retaining track **50** has overhanging flanges **51** at the top (see FIG. **8**) defining a restricted, upwardly opening slot **52**. A retaining element **53** is rigidly secured to the cart frame **19**, preferably on the center line of the cart, directly between the swivelled front wheels **17**. The retain-

ing element extends downward and carries a cross bar or the like **54** at its lower extremity, which projects laterally outward from the lower end of the retaining element.

As the cart **11** approaches the entrance to the down-going conveyor, and the front wheels of the cart are engaged by the guide blocks **43**. The front of the cart is thus centered with respect to the retaining track **50**, enabling the retaining element **53** to enter the slot **52**. Once the retaining element is received in the slot **52**, it is prevented from lifting vertically out of the slot, by reason of the inwardly projecting flanges **51**, which overlie the cross bar **54**. This new feature is very important to the safety and efficiency of operation of the system because it prevents the front end of the cart from tilting upwardly at any time, which otherwise might cause the cart to overturn, possibly discharging and damaging its contents with potential damage to the cart itself and possibly the conveyor and the attendant delays and inconveniences. While center tracks have been used heretofore for lateral guidance of the front of the cart, the important function of retaining the cart against upward tilting of the front end is new and contributes importantly to the safety and effectiveness of the system.

In the system of the invention, the operation of the down-going and up-going conveyors is fundamentally similar. The up-going conveyor, shown in FIGS. **4** and **6**, is provided with guide tracks **22'** for the back wheels **16** of the cart and **23'** for the front wheels **17**. The front wheel tracks **23'**, as in the case of the down-going conveyor, are offset horizontally forward sufficiently that the cart **11** is supported in a substantially horizontal orientation, although a very slight upward tilt may be desirable from the standpoint of overall conveyor geometry. Tapered guide blocks **55** are provided at the lower landing area to guide the front wheels of the cart to a center position and guide the retaining element **53** of the cart into the slotted retaining strip **50'** of the conveyor.

For the up-going conveyor, the vertical spacing between the conveyor bands **26'** relative to the wheel tracks **22'** is somewhat less than in the down-going conveyor of FIG. **2**, such that the projecting elements **35** of the conveyor bands engage the lower portions **46** of the abutment brackets, as is desired.

At the respective landing areas **56**, **57**, the supporting platforms for the carts preferably are inclined slightly downward in the direction of cart movement, so that there is a slight assist from gravity in injecting the carts into the conveyor at the lower platform and in removing the carts from the system when they reach the upper landing platform.

In accordance with the present invention, the up-going conveyor also includes an advantageous conveyor housing arrangement in which the upper conveyor housing walls **58** extend laterally outward from housing side walls **59** in the same manner as the walls **41**, **42** extend outwardly from the side walls **39**, **40** in the down-going conveyor shown in FIG. **3**. The housing top walls **58** extend laterally outward at the lowest practicable level and, in the illustration of FIG. **4**, this is approximately at the level of the axis of the back wheels **16** over the inclined portion of the conveyor.

FIGS. **7–10**, **12** and **13** illustrate an advantageous form go of load-carrying configuration for the carts **11**. In particular, the illustrated carts incorporate a back-tilted load platform, preferably of somewhat J-shaped configuration. The main frame of the load platform can be formed of a continuous length of rigid tubular material forming tilted back elements **61**, bottom elements **62** and a generally vertically oriented front section **63** of inverted U-shaped configuration. Typically and desirably, the bottom of the load platform includes additional bottom frame elements indicated generally at **64** to assist in the load support. The back of the load platform, defined by the upwardly extending tubular element **61**, preferably is open to allow a plurality of carts to be stacked in a telescoped manner, as reflected in FIG. **11**. In the first illustrated form of the cart, upper ends of the back-forming tubular section **61** are joined at upper ends by a tubular section **65**, forming a push handle for the cart. The front of the load platform is supported by uprights **66**. As is evident in the drawings, the load platform is open at both sides, accommodating load items **67** of much greater width of the cart and load platform.

In a particularly preferred and advantageous form of load-carrying cart according to the invention, the bottom **62** of the load platform is disposed at an angle such, and is so positioned relative to the wheels of the cart that, when the cart is on an up-going conveyor (FIG. **4**), the bottom **62** of the platform is substantially parallel to and substantially at the level of the top surface **58** of the conveyor housing. Accordingly, any luggage items **67** projecting laterally from the cart and its load platform, will extend out over the top surface **58** of the conveyor housings. In the case of duffel bags or soft luggage, for example, where projecting portions of load items may tend to sag, the smooth upper surface **58** of the conveyor housings will serve to support and stabilize the load. In the regions of the upper and lower landing areas **56**, **57**, the level of the top surface **58** of the conveyor housings is at or slightly under the level of the lowest point **68** of the load platform, so as to provide clearance for the load in the landing areas.

For the down-going conveyor, shown in FIG. **2**, the level of the top surfaces **41**, **42** of the conveyor housings is, in all positions of the cart, whether in the landing areas or on the incline, at or slightly below the lowest portion **68** of the load platform, to provide for overhang of the load.

It will be understood that the illustrated configuration of cart and conveyor, which allows for the lateral overhang and support of load items, can also accommodate lateral projection from the main frame of the cart of a rigid load-carrying platform, basket or the like.

Notwithstanding that the top surfaces of the conveyor housings provide support for laterally projecting load items, there is a desired limit to the extent to which load items should protrude from the physical confines of the cart proper. To this end, a load limiting frame **70** (FIG. **3**) is provided at the entrance to the conveyor. The entrance frame **70** preferably is a rigid, free standing structure having vertical side elements **71** to establish the maximum width and maximum projection of any load item carried on the cart **11**. A bar **72** extending across the top of the frame establishes a vertical limit for any load permitted to enter the conveyor.

Provision is customarily made to prevent the entry into the area of the conveyor mechanism of either persons or carts not specially designed for the conveyor. The variety of control devices and techniques is available for this purpose, which does not form part of the present invention. Among other things, however, the tapered guide blocks **43**, for the down-going conveyor, and **55**, for the up-going conveyor, in conjunction with the side walls of the conveyor housings, would prevent entry of most carts not intended for the conveyor system, unless fortuitously the wheel spacing and configuration were nearly identical.

The conveyor system of the invention contemplates the use of load-carrying carts having a single swivelled front wheel, as well as having multiple front wheels. An advan-

tageous form of cart having a single front wheel is shown in FIGS. **15–19**. The cart shown therein is essentially the same as the cart shown in FIGS. **7–10**, **12** and **13**, except for the front wheel configuration. Whereas the previously described cart has a pair of spaced-apart front wheels, mounted on swivels, and a centrally positioned, downwardly extending retaining element, the cart of FIGS. **15–19** has a single front wheel **80** centrally mounted at the front of the cart by a swivel bracket **81**. Pursuant to one aspect of the invention, the swivel bracket **81** includes laterally outwardly projecting retaining elements **82** positioned adjacent lower extremities of the swivel bracket. These retaining elements **82** can be of any suitable form, such as rod-like projections, laterally projecting flanges extending from the lower portions of the swivel bracket, etc.

A retaining track **83** (FIG. **18**) extends lengthwise along the conveyor, centrally between the side walls of the conveyor housing, in the same manner as the retaining tracks **52**, **52'** shown in FIGS. **5** and **6**. The retaining track **83** comprises spaced-apart guide elements **84** provided with retaining flanges **85** along their upper edges defining an guide slot **86**. The width of the guide slot **86** is such as to closely accommodate the swivel bracket **81** oriented in a straight-ahead position. The laterally projecting retaining elements **82** are positioned to lie just below the overhanging flanges **85** such that, once the wheel assembly **81**, **82** enters the retaining structure **83**, the front wheel is locked therein against upward movement by the flanges **85** and retaining elements **82**. This prevents any flipping of the cart **11** as it traverses the conveyor. Desirably, the entrance and exit ends of the retaining structure are such that the swivel bracket **81** is engaged by the retaining structure substantially at all times while the cart is engaged to be advanced by the conveyor bands.

The conveyor system of the invention is designed to accommodate load-carrying carts with either freely rotating wheels or braked back wheels (or both). FIGS. **11** and **20** illustrate typical forms of carts configured according to the invention, which are provided with means for locking the rear wheels **16**. The two carts of FIGS. **11** and **20** are essentially the same, except that the cart of **11** is provided with two swivelling front wheels and a central retaining element, while the cart of FIG. **20** has a single swivelling front wheel with retaining elements combined with the front wheel swivel bracket. In both cases, the rear wheels **16** are mounted at the ends of vertical tubular elements **90** at each side. Push handles **91** are pivotally mounted to the vertical elements **90** at **92**. By mechanisms not shown and forming no part of the present invention, the push handles are connected at the pivot housings **92** to braking elements associated with the wheel **16**. When the handles are released, the wheels are automatically braked. When the handles are pressed by a user, the wheel brakes are released. The arrangement is such that the wheels are automatically locked when the carts are unattended.

To accommodate carts with locked wheels, a modified form of the new conveyor system is provided, as shown in FIGS. **21–23**. In the modified system, the guide tracks **22'** for the back wheels of the cart are formed by a continuous series of rollers **93**, **94** arranged side-by-side over the full length of the guide track. Thus, when the braked wheels are placed on the guide track, the cart can be moved along by the conveyor bands, because the locked wheels simply rotate the individual rollers which constitute the guide track.

As shown particularly in FIGS. **22** and **23**, the freely rotating rollers **93**, **94** are arranged in two side-by-side rows, with the rollers **93** constituting one row extending along one side of the guide track **22'**, and the rollers **94** similarly extending in an adjacent, along the opposite side of the guide track **22'**. Additionally, the wheels **94** are offset from the wheels **93**, so that the axles **95** of a wheel **94** lies between an adjacent set of wheels **93**, and the axles **96** of the wheels **93** lie between adjacent wheels **94**. The sets of wheels **93**, **94** are separated longitudinally a minimal distance, sufficient only to accommodate the presence of the axles **95**, **96**, as shown best in FIG. **23**. The arrangement is such that the respective sets of wheels **93**, **94**, in combination, form a reasonably level surface, as the locked cart wheels **16** transfer from one set of wheels to the other in advancing along the conveyor path. As is reflected in FIGS. **22** and **23**, the diameter of the wheels **16** is a substantial multiple of the diameter of the support wheels **93**, **94** (for example, five-six to one) such that the small "valleys" between longitudinally adjacent sets of wheels **93–94** has minimal effect upon the desired forward movement of the carts, and readily permits the carts to advance along the conveyor path in the manner desired.

As will be understood, when the guide track **22** for the rear wheels is formed of rollers **93**, **94**, the conveyor can handle carts with conventional, free rotating wheels and carts with braked wheels, interchangeably.

The conveyor system of the present invention provides a unique melding of conveyor and cart features to provide a highly efficient, completely safe system for the conveyance of loaded (and unloaded) carts from one floor level to another. The design features of the present invention enable the configuration of the cart to have an extremely low center of gravity when loaded. At the same time, the system allows for the loading of the cart in a manner to accommodate overhanging, laterally projecting load items and, where appropriate, enabling the load-carrying structure, platform or basket, to extend beyond the normal limits of the cart and to overhang the top of the conveyor housing.

Of particular significance is the provision of means at the front of the cart for engagement with a longitudinally extending retaining structure to prevent any tilting of the cart as it is being advanced by engagement with rear portions of the cart. By positively restraining the front of the cart against possible tilting, it becomes feasible to shorten the wheel base of the cart somewhat which in turn permits the offset between the guide tracks for the front and back wheels to be reduced. This in turn allows the load-bearing platform of the cart to be lowered, while allowing for laterally overhanging loads. Additionally, by providing for a few degrees of downward tilt of the front of the cart on the down-going conveyor and a few degrees of upward tilt on the up-going conveyor, further reduction in the offset between the tracks **22**, **23** is enabled. This in turn allows further reduction in the level of the load platform on the cart. The combination of features of the invention provides for a system of greatly superior utility, efficiency and safety as compared to known systems for this general purpose.

In a particularly advantageous form of the cart, the back and bottom of the load platform are back tilted, to have somewhat of a J-shaped configuration. Two advantages are derived from this arrangement in conjunction with the conveyor system of the invention. One of the significant advantages, shown in FIG. **4**, is that the bottom of the load platform can lie in a plane generally parallel to and substantially at the level of the upper surface of the conveyor housing. This allows load items to project laterally outward from all areas of the load platform, extending closely above the top of the conveyor housing, which can provide support and stability for the load.